

● Article ●

Avant-garde, Pastiche, and Media Crossing: Films of Terayama Shūji

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Abstract

Terayama Shūji had many faces; playwright, stage-director, the founder of theatrical troupes, poet, novelist, lyricist, songwriter, essayist, journalist, critic, script writer, film director and TV presenter. His creative activities covered a wide range of media – printing media for his poetry, novels, and essays; broadcasting media for his radio and television dramas and programmes; theatrical media for his avant-garde plays; music media for his pop songs; film media for his surrealistic shorts and experimental features; and even advertising media for his eye-catching, state of art film and theatre posters and fliers. Terayama's works are, whether they are poems, plays, films, music or advertisements, constructed by intertextually combining the conventions and codes of various media. The way of structuring is nowhere more noticeable than in his cinematic works. Therefore, in this essay, I would like to discuss the issue of media-crossing by referring to Terayama's films, especially his two feature films, *Sho wo Stuteyo, Machi ni Deyō* (Throw away Books, Rally in the Streets) and *Den'en ni Shisu* (Pastoral; To Die in the Country). The media-crossing found in his films is closely associated with their other features – pastiche and nostalgia as the most distinguished qualities of Terayama's films. The second point that I would like to make is, therefore, that the media hybridity, pastiche and nostalgia make them forerunners of postmodern cinema in Japan and at the same time the postmodern quality and its political conservatism creates a great tension with the culturally iconoclastic avant-gardism of his films.

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Machi ni Deyō (Throw away Books, Rally in the Streets) and *Den'en ni Shisu* (Pastoral; To Die in the Country).¹ The media-crossing found in his films is closely associated with their other features – pastiche and nostalgia as the most distinguished qualities of Terayama's films. The second point that I would like to make is, therefore, that the media hybridity pastiche and nostalgia make them forerunners of postmodern cinema in Japan and at the same time the postmodern quality and its political conservatism creates a great tension with the culturally iconoclastic avant-gardism of his films.

Sho wo Stuteyo, Machi ni Deyō is Terayama's first feature film and concerns a young boy and his eccentric family living in a run-down apartment in the district of Shinjuku. The young boy who is still in a prep-school adores a handsome, wealthy university student and frequently visits him at his home and at a practicing ground where he plays football. His sister is autistic, refusing to talk to

anyone including her family and communicating only with her pet rabbit. Her nagging grandmother is so frustrated with her that she asks her Korean-Japanese neighbour to kill her rabbit. The young boy's sister is gang raped when she wanders into the dingy changing room of a university football club looking for her brother. Presumably there is little point summarizing the story of the film, because it is extremely fragmented and is constantly interrupted by the insertions of flashbacks, non-diegetic images and scenes irrelevant to it.

Sho wo Suteyo, Machi ni Deyō is undoubtedly a prime case of media-mix. The catchy title of the film, which eventually went on to become a fashionable watchword for the Japanese hippie generation, is shared by his three different works in different media. The first *Sho wo Suteyo, Machi ni Deyō* appeared as a selection of essays in 1967 and the drama *Sho wo Suteyo, Machi ni Deyō* was first performed in 1968 and the film was released in 1971. Though they are totally independent works, the film heavily relies on its preceding versions for its materials and forms.

The film's indebtedness to its predecessors does not stop at borrowing materials and themes from them. It is an attempt to render the film media into the written media.

'When I threw away books and rallied in the streets, I was thinking of turning the city into a book... By abandoning printed books in my study and walking into the streets of this city, books paradoxically begin to have greater and wider meaning in my thought.'²

Terayama's lofty command *Sho wo suteyo* (throw away books) and his request *machi ni deyō* (rally in the streets) do not mean that we should give up books and printed words, but conversely that we should try to read our towns, cities or surroundings as kinds of books. This is also the main claim in the book version of *Sho wo Suteyo, Machi ni Deyō*. In the film, Terayama makes brick walls, sides of concrete buildings, school grounds, toilette doors into pages of a book on which he scribbles and paints words. Many of those words are quotations from the books including *Sho wo Suteyo, Machi ni Deyō* as well as passages which were already in

his other books. Terayama stresses this point as follows;

Written words are everywhere in the filmed city of *Sho wo Suteyo, Machi ni Deyō*. It was my intention to make, so to speak, a 'film to read' ... I could say that we made this film as an attempt to liberate the experience of reading from the confinement of reading printed books. For this purpose we expanded a book into the size of a large city and filled it with signs ranging from the huge graffiti on the football ground, 'Do not give freedom to the enemy of freedom' to a passage from the Old Testament written on the corner of the toilette.³

In the film the city of Tokyo is covered with quotations from the works of such writers as Vladimir Majakovsky, Langston Hughes, André Marlaux, Georgius, and Terayama himself.

Of course it was not Terayama that first combined the film media with the written media in this way. In many films of Jean-Luc Godard written signs play as important a role as visual and acoustic signs. One of the functions of written words in his films is to emphasise their philosophical and political contents which may not be easily conveyed through visual signs. Written words play a prominent role in Ōshima Nagisa's experimental films as well. For him, too, they carry political implications, especially those of sexual politics. In contrast, the ideological and political significance with which Godard and Ōshima charge those words are almost completely absent in Terayama's film. He himself admits, 'the moment a town is made into a book in my film, all the languages are depoliticized.'⁴

Terayama was once the selector of poems for a teenage magazine. He later selected his favourite ones and got them published as a book called *High-teen Shishū* (Poems of the High-teen Youth). The drama version of *Sho wo Suteyo, Machi ni Deyō*, which was written for his Tenjō Sajiki theatrical company, consists of the poems included in this book. The play takes a form of poetry anthology. An interesting feature of the play when it was first performed was that some of the roles were played by the very boys and girls who had actually written

the poems. Terayama called this kind of theatre, *stage vérité*, the theatrical version of *cinéma vérité*. The drama *Show Suteyo, Machi ni Deyō* was not constructed as a poetry recital but was arranged and produced like a musical or music hall review. Some poems are turned into songs and other poems are accompanied with a dance or a comic sketch.

The film *Sho wo Suteyo, Machi ni Deyō* is just like its theatrical version. Some of Tenjō Sajiki actors and some non-actors who appeared in the first performance of the drama also play central roles in the film and the styles of their performance were very similar to those in the play, being non-naturalistic and Brechtian. The film and the play share a common structure. Accumulating short episodes and intercutting them by still and moving images are the structure of the film, whereas amassing unconnected scenes and inserting heterogeneous theatrical elements are that of the play. The film opens and closes with the monologue of the protagonist played by Sasaki Eimei, whose poem is included in *High-teen Shishū* and who appears in the play. In those scenes he directly talks to the camera, as if he were delivering soliloquies on the stage. Probably the most significant factor which makes the look of the film very theatrical is its *mise-en-scène*. While the scenes where the protagonist and his family appear are filmed on location, non-diegetic scenes are shot in studio and their highly artistic set designs are very similar to the surrealistic stage designs by Kuni Kawauchi. In many scenes the camera stays static and consequently actions look as if they were filmed stage actions. They sometimes look like those in the films of Charlie Chaplin, Marcel Carné and Anthony Asquith, in which the camera hardly moves and film actors move in and out of frame as theatre actors appear and disappear on the stage. More importantly, the remarkable feature in the film's *mise-en-scène* is almost total lack of point-of-view shots. The camera simply observes the characters, actions and surroundings and is hardly positioned in the point of view of a character in the film. Cinema and the theatre naturally share many common features. However, one of the major difference between cinematic and theatrical experiences is that in the former the viewer is allowed to share a viewpoint with a character on

the screen, whereas in the latter the audience remains a neutral observer of actions on the stage. In this sense the film version of *Sho wo Suteyo, Machi ni Deyō* can be said to be deliberately more theatrical than cinematic.

If the cinematic version of *Sho wo Suteyo, Machi ni Deyō* was an attempt to make a film into a book or a stage performance, *Den'en ni Shisu* was his experiment to visualize his own book bearing the same title and other works. *Den'en ni Shisu* published in 1965 is his third collection of tankas and is generally considered as the work which not only marks the peak of Terayama's career as a tanka poet, but also is one of the greatest achievements in the modern tanka literature. Most of tanka in this collection are either autobiographical or about traditions and customs with which he is closely associated in Aomori where he was born and brought up. The film version begins with the superimposition of two tanka from the collection with their voice-over recitation. The voice has a broad Aomori accent. More tanka are quoted in the same way throughout the film and most of the film's imagery is inspired by them.

This collection of tanka is not the only literary source for the cinema. Many subjects and materials come from his collection of autobiographical essays entitled *Tareka Kokyō wo Omowazaru* (Who doesn't think of his home?). Though the book's subtitle is 'An Autobiography', what is written in this book cannot be taken at its face value. His autobiography is heavily fictionalized. The first essay in the book begins, 'I was born on the 10th of December, 1935 in a waiting room of a small railway station on the north coast of Aomori prefecture.'⁵ The date of birth is correct but his birth place is not. He just fantasized that he was born while his parents were traveling. A little further on he writes about his father, 'Though he was a policeman, he was alcoholic. He was very quiet at home and rarely talked to me. However, he was enthusiastic with his work and I hear that he one time spit on the face of a university professor who had been arrested for being politically subversive.'⁶ It is true that his father was a policeman but there is no evidence that he was alcoholic and spit on the professor.

Based on fictional literary sources, the film

Den'en ni Shisu further fictionalizes Terayama's childhood. In the film the boy named Takano Hiroyuki is a fifteen-years-old junior-high school student and living with his mother in a large country house near Mt. Osore-zan. His father seems to have died during the war. The boy is dreaming of running away from home and his winging mother. One day the beautiful wife of his next door neighbour, whom he adores, asks him to elope with her. At this point, the film suddenly fades out and when pictures come back, it turns out that what we have been watching is a rush version of a film shot by the same Takano Hiroyuki who is now grown up to be a film director. He confides a film critic who have seen the rush with him in a projection room that he does not think that he is representing his past as it really was. He returns dispirited from the film studio to his home to find himself of twenty years ago waiting for him. Being guided by him, the film director, 'I' of the present visit his home of twenty years ago and retrace his past again. The second story of Hiroyuki's boyhood past differs in many places from the first story I have briefly summarized above, but the most crucial difference is that on the day of running away from home, the beautiful woman does not turn up where they promised to meet. The boy Hiroyuki, who successfully eloped with the neighbour's wife in the first half of the film, now returns to the same scene accompanying the grown-up Hiroyuki, and witnesses her suiced with her lover in a small shrine at the foot of Mt. Osore-zan.

Den'en ni Shisu is an attempt to visualize Terayama's life history and memory, but at the same time to deconstruct them. In the treatment of the film he writes down the following short passage. 'This is a fiction in a form of the biography of a young man. If we wish to break a spell of history, we must, first of all, liberate ourselves from our individual memories. Searching the identity of a young man (and our identity) through his attempt to revise his memory is the aim of this film.'⁷ The film critic in *Den'en ni Shisu* who is also the disguised alter ego of Terayama Shuji advises the film director who is a fictional surrogate of Terayama Shuji himself, 'On the whole, the past will become fiction.' Then, he adds, 'As long as man cannot liberate himself from memory, he cannot gain freedom ... Didn't Borges

say that the silver coin you lost five days ago is not the silver coin you've found today.'

This postmodern understanding of history, memory and the past has echoes not only in his belief but also in the styles of his films. The most distinctive feature in *Den'en ni Shisu* and Terayama's films in general is that they are constructed as 'pastiche'. Pastiche is the imitation of a distinct, unique style, and the wearing of a stylistic mask. In the case of Terayama his pastiche is not the mimicry of a single but various styles, and the imitation of not only the styles of other writers and artists but also those of his own. Since he founded Tenjō Sajiki what he has advocated is the revival of popular spectacles and shows in the framework of the avant-garde theatre. Terayama states, 'I introduced into Tenjō Sajiki plays the energy of folk performing arts in order to revive the modern Japanese theatre. Ominous scenery designed by Yoko'o Tadanori and Uno Akira [both renowned pop artists], *jinta* [music played by a small brass band for the purpose of advertising, especially for circus, travelling players and movie theatres], *enka* songs and singers, drag-show artists with heavy make-ups, *naniwabushi* reciter; without these you cannot talk about Tenjō Sajiki plays.'⁸

Like Tenjō Sajiki performances, the film version of *Den'en ni Shisu* is structured not only as a collage of these various performing arts styles, but also as a collage of filmmaking styles. When Terayama was a young boy, he watched a large number of films in the movie theatre owned by one of his uncles and after he moved to Tokyo he frequented many cinemas. As many film directors do, he freely quotes works of other directors. We can name among others Federico Fellini, Michelangelo Antonioni, Roman Polanski and Ingmar Bergman as filmmakers whose styles Terayama imitated in creating *Den'en ni Shisu*. The carnivalesque representation of the backstage of a circus troupe accompanied by *jinta*'s comic music and the depiction of the dreadful landscape of Mt. Osore-zan with the artificial sound effect of wind are clearly inspired by Fellini's works. A group of old women in hooded black robes, gossiping and prophesying, come from Polanski's depictions of the three witches in *The Tragedy of Macbeth*. The lonely, existentially tormented characters of the

film director and the critic in the film have their precedences in Antonioni's films. One of the most striking quotations from other films is the scene in which the boy protagonist plays a game of *shōgi* with the grown-up protagonist in the desolate wintry landscape. This reminds us of the scene in Bergman's *The Seventh Seal*, in which a knight plays a game of chess with *Death*. The scene in *Den'en ni Shisu* is somehow more cheerful due to the design by Awatsu Kiyoshi, but their similarity is unmistakable.

According to Fredric Jameson, after the period of literary and artistic modernism ended, less and less personal style became available and in its place the practice of pastiche appeared. Finding it impossible to find a unique and unmistakable style, 'the producers of culture have nowhere to turn but to the past: the imitation of dead styles, speech through all the masks and voices stored up in the imaginary museum of a now global culture.'⁹ The problem of pastiche lies in the fact that it is a mere, depthless and toothless imitation of old styles and a ransacking of the superseded genres. In such a world of pastiche, a fascination with style displaces the material dimensions of historical context. Jameson describes this situation, 'the past as referent is effaced, and all that remains is a self-referential intertextuality.'¹⁰

Terayama's films, especially *Den'en ni Shisu* contain strong elements of nostalgia in the senses of both yearning for the return to the past and longing for home. It is true that he has an ambivalent relationship with his home and the time when he lived there. He expresses in his poems, essays and films his childhood wishes of leaving home and his mother and of moving to Tokyo. He also disapprovingly describes the backwardness and grotesqueness of the local customs and tradition in the past. Nevertheless, his works are often the explicit expression of his deep, conscious and unconscious yearning for a simpler and more human social system and a solid, unchanging basis on which he can establish his own identity.

In *Den'en ni Shisu* there are full of nostalgic images of the people, the landscape, and the customs of Tsugaru, Terayama's native land, most of which have long vanished. After the voice-over recitation of his two tanka, the first image we see in the pre-credit sequence is a group of children

in traditional kimono playing hide-and-seek in a cemetery. In this impressive scene, the girl in bobbed hair is covering her eyes with her hands and waiting for other children to hide, but when she opens her eyes, she finds her friends have already grown up to adults. This is followed by a scene of a path leading to Mt. Osore-zan, in which a woman's body is carried in a horse-driven cart and a boy in an old-fashioned school uniform is following it. A few scenes later a *miko*, a local medium, is advising a pregnant woman what to do to deliver a baby safely. After this, the boy protagonist goes to Mt. Osore-zan on his own to meet a *Itako*, a shamanic medium, and asks her to bring down the spirit of his father. On the background of these scenes, local nursery rhymes, *nenbutsu* (Buddhist prayers), *goeika* (pilgrims' hymns), and local versions of lullabies are played.

When Terayama made this film, he needed to consult specialists about disappeared local customs, especially spiritualism and human culling. He had never experienced at first hand as none of us have. Although Terayama was born and lived in Tsugaru till the age of eighteen, all those old customs he described in the film and all those local people whom he created must have been as alien to him as to those of us who are not from this region. He tried to define his identity by searching his memories of home and childhood and by setting them against his present situation as a writer who settled in Tokyo and even had an international fame. Nevertheless, the images of Terayama's Tsugaru and its people he recreated are not very different from those who we would imagine when we think of Tsugakuru.

Besides, as we have seen, Terayama has a strong tendency to fictionalize his past and his memory of home. What he represents as his past or his home are imagined and invented versions of his past experience in his native land. Therefore, rather than they are representation of the past, they can be defined as a perception of the present as history; that is, that of the present is defamilialized and distanced from its immediacy. This is the problem of Terayama's nostalgic way of representing his past and his home. *Den'en ni Shisu* and Terayama's other films transform the past and the memory of his home into a series of images, a spectacle, something to be looked

at. In this nostalgic version of history, a political and critical perspective is displaced by decoration and display, a fascination with mere surfaces and also the material dimensions of historical context is substituted by a fascination with styles. The past and the memory of home are reproduced by Terayama as flat, depthless pastiche.

Terayama's films as well as his underground theatre are generally considered to be the most avant-garde and he himself claimed that he was an avant-garde artist. What makes his films and his theatre so avant-garde is radical and anarchic juxtapositions of all cinematic and theatrical styles. These borrowed and quoted styles are mainly modernist and pre-modernist ones and therefore his avant-gardism is not the movement of going forward but going-backward. Further tension between his avant-gardism and his works can be found in the represented subjects and motifs. Terayama is deeply enchanted with the past and the memory, and with his childhood home and the land of his ancestors and verbalize and visualize them. Thus, his avant-garde films and plays are backwardly gazing at the past, rather than forwardly looking at the future.

What Terayama achieved to create through media-crossing and pastiche are only replicas or simulacra of his past and his home - reified

images of the past and the home, which lack their 'referent' in signification. Unlike the older modernist avant-gardism, which was generally functioned in such ways to be critical, negative, contestatory, subversive and oppositional to a society, his version of postmodernist avant-gardism more conform to the system and conditions of his society than protest them. The sexual, cultural and political subversiveness of his films and plays do not carry much critical bite, exactly because his subversiveness is postmodern.

¹ The English translation of Terayama's films follow the release titles in the United States. Otherwise, the original titles will be translated literally into English.

² Terayama Shūji, *Terayama Shūji no Gikyoku* (The Collected Plays of Terayama Shūji), vol. 7, Shichōsha, Tokyo, 1987, p. 351.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 352.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 352.

⁵ Terayama Shūji, *Tareka Kokyō wo Omowazaru*, Kadokawa Shoten, Tokyo, 1973, p. 8.

⁶ *ibid.* p. 9.

⁷ Terayama Shūji, *Terayama Shūji no Gikyoku*, vol. 6, *op. cit.*, p. 358.

⁸ Terayama Shūji, *Terayama Shūji no Gikyoku*, vol. 7, *op. cit.*, p. 360.

⁹ Frederic Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Duke University Press, 1992.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*,